


# Educator's Charter Schools Help Revive New Orleans

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MICHELE NORRIS, host:

Talk to people in New Orleans and they'll say everything has changed since Hurricane Katrina. Not just because they lost their homes or even a loved one, many say their lives are now consumed with helping the city recover.

NPR's Larry Abramson has this profile of one educator who says that in many ways, his job has been changed for the better. It's part of our series on New Orleans residence making a difference.

LARRY ABRAMSON: Even though James Meza doesn't wear the uniform of a first responder, he is doing rescue work. Meza is saving the children of New Orleans from the miserable education system they have before the storm.

Professor JAMES MEZA (Dean, Education, University of New Orleans): Hey, how are you? Good, good. We just come here - and, hey, Ms. Sues(ph), how are you.

Unidentified Woman #1: Hello.

Mr. MEZA: How are you?

ABRAMSON: This is Gentilly Terrace Elementary, the newest of six charter schools, Meza helps run around the city, though his real job is serving as dean of the education college at the University of New Orleans. Since the storm, these charters have become Meza's life. He believes schools can be the seats for struggling neighborhoods.

Prof. MEZA: There seems to be some relationship between students coming to Gentilly Terrace and the percent of families that have returned to the neighborhood.

ABRAMSON: Meza hopes the presence of a solid school will jumpstart the recovery. That's the big picture. But while we're walking the halls, Meza gets a smaller reward, the sound of kids learning.

Unidentified Woman #2: You've got to get how much money?

Unidentified Group: (Soundbite of talking children)

Unidentified Woman #2: No, nothing?. Remember we doubled (unintelligible)?

Unidentified Group: Eighty.

Unidentified Woman #2: Eighty tons. Very good...

ABRAMSON: Gentilly Terrace was closed until last September. Now, it's a sunlit dream of a school, with tall ceilings and gleaming paint. The upside to the storm is that many schools now have all new equipment. It's a chance to start over, and though he's not the type to get emotional, Meza is jazzed about what's going on here.

Prof. MEZA: It's just amazing, the excitement we have in this community about Gentilly Terrace.

ABRAMSON: We pile into Meza's Lexus to take a little tour at Gentilly. When I first met Jim Meza a year-and-a-half ago, we made the same drive, then most of the middle-class homes here were vacant or obscured by piles of debris.

Today, most of the trash is gone. But the people are still missing.

Prof. MEZA: There is certainly improvement, but it's so isolated and inconsistent.

ABRAMSON: This grim view is what Meza sees on his way to work every day. Still, he feels his schools are clearly helping the surrounding neighborhoods. Meza says before Katrina he wasn't always this connected to the world outside the university.

Prof. MEZA: Katrina has given us an avenue to engage in real-world experience and to assume some responsibilities for outcomes and to be a major player in the recovery effort.

(Soundbite of car door closing)

ABRAMSON: The recovery effort at Pierre A. Capdau Elementary shows just how overwhelming this task is. When I first visited Capdau with Meza in 2006, the school had been quickly repaired after the storm and was apparently in good shape. But now that rush job can no longer hide the deeper decay.

Prof. MEZA: Unfortunately, when you do work like this, it'll soon going to last for a short period of time until we waterproof the building.

ABRAMSON: While the surrounding neighborhood has been improving, this 80-year- old school building has started to crumble. Vines are sprouting from one particularly large crack in the stucco. While instruction goes on in one classroom, workers prepare another for repainting.

James Meza may have been trained as an academic, but he's morphed into a part- time subcontractor. Meza says this is part of his education in the real world of school management.

Prof. MEZA: We prepare leaders for the management of facilities. We prepare them for the management and understanding of budget, not only instruction. So it really gives me firsthand information of the challenges one has as they assume responsibilities of a school district.

(Soundbite of door house opening)

Prof. MEZA: And this is our principal.

Unidentified Woman #3: Hi. How are you?

Prof. MEZA: How are you feeling today?

Unidentified Woman #3: Feeling good, felling good. Okay.

ABRAMSON: Jim Meza is a (unintelligible), 59 years old, he's reserved, but this New Orleans native is also endowed with plenty of Southern charms. He greets the staff warmly. He doesn't hug, but his handshakes are warm and long.

(Soundbite of crowd)

ABRAMSON: Principal Christine Mitchell who's been here since the school reopened after Katrina. She really believes in Meza's philosophy that these schools will bring back Gentilly.

Ms. CHRISTINE MITCHELL (Principal, Pierre A. Capdau Elementary School): I do. I do. I really do. We see progress. We see people working daily on their houses, and because we have been fortunate to get a lot of support from community organizations such as Hands on New Orleans, (unintelligible) there's also (unintelligible) help bring the neighborhood back, as well as helping out with the school.

ABRAMSON: It can be a little hard for outsiders to understand all of this optimism. For all the progress here, some areas are still a mess. As we drive back to Meza's office at the University of New Orleans, he points out the many closed buildings, signs of ongoing struggles with hurricane damage.

Prof. MEZA: These areas to the right are with the married housing areas and they had not returned. They were -- because we're very close to the levy.

ABRAMSON: James Meza has also suffered his share of personal defeat since the storm. Last year, the local school authority turned down his application to open another charter school. He blames that on some simple mistakes made during the application process. That was a big embarrassment, he says, for him and the university.

Prof. MEZA: It's been difficult, there's no doubt about it. But every day, you know, it gets a little better. You know, like any type of recovery, you're going to go through periods of quick improvement, and then you're going to have some setbacks.

(Soundbite of moving car)

ABRAMSON: The way ahead is still dark. But now James Meza can see where he's going.

LARRY ABRAMSON, NPR News.

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